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Workshop: Freedom of Information Law CLE Credit - Statement of Copyright

Kathi Westcott

American Association of University Professors

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Statement on Copyright

The statement that follows was approved in March 1999 by the Association's Special Committee on Distance Education and Intellectual Property Issues. It was adopted by the Association's Council and endorsed by the Eighty-fifth Annual Meeting in June 1999.

The objective of copyright is, in the words of the U.S. Constitution, to “promote the progress of science and useful arts.” To achieve that objective, authors are given exclusive rights under the Copyright Act to reproduce their works, to use them as the basis for derivative works, to disseminate them to the public, and to perform and display them publicly. Institutions of higher learning in particular should interpret and apply the law of copyright so as to encourage the discovery of new knowledge and its dissemination to students, to the profession, and to the public. This mission is reflected in the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*: “Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.”

Academic Practice

Within that tradition, it has been the prevailing academic practice to treat the faculty member as the copyright owner of works that are created independently and at the faculty member's own initiative for traditional academic purposes. Examples include class notes and syllabi; books and articles; works of fiction and nonfiction; poems and dramatic works; musical and choreographic works; pictorial, graphic, and sculptural works; and educational software, commonly known as “courseware.” This practice has been followed for the most part, regardless of the physical medium in which these “traditional academic works” appear; that is, whether on paper or in audiovisual or electronic form. As will be developed below, this practice should therefore ordinarily apply to the development of courseware for use in programs of distance education.

Unilateral Institutional Policies

Some colleges and universities have promulgated policies, typically unenforced, that proclaim traditional academic works to be the property of the institution. Faculty handbooks, for example, sometimes declare that faculty members shall be regarded as having assigned their copyrights to the institution. The Copyright Act, however, explicitly requires that a transfer of copyright, or of any exclusive right (such as the exclusive right to publish), must be evidenced in writing and signed by the author-transferor. If the faculty member is indeed the initial owner of copyright, then a unilateral institutional declaration cannot effect a transfer, nor is it likely that a valid transfer can be effected by the issuance of appointment letters to new faculty members requiring, as a condition of employment, that they abide by a faculty handbook that purports to vest in the institution the ownership of all works created by the faculty member for an indefinite future.

Other colleges and universities instead proclaim that traditional academic works are “works made for hire,” with the consequence that the institution is regarded as the initial owner of copyright. This institutional claim is often stated to rest upon the use by the faculty member, in creating such works, of college or university resources, such as office space, supplies, library facilities, ordinary access to computers and networks, and money.

The pertinent definition of “work made for hire” is a work prepared by an “employee within the scope of his or her employment.” In the typical work-for-hire situation, the content and purpose of the employee-prepared works are under the control and direction of the employer; the employee is accountable to the employer for the content and design of the work. In the case of traditional academic works, however, the faculty member rather than the institution determines the subject matter, the intellectual approach and direction, and the conclusions. This is the very essence of academic freedom. Were the institution to own the copyright in such

works, under a work-made-for-hire theory, it would have the power, for example, to decide where the work is to be published, to edit and otherwise revise it, to prepare derivative works based on it (such as translations, abridgments, and literary, musical, or artistic variations), and indeed to censor and forbid dissemination of the work altogether. Such powers, so deeply inconsistent with fundamental principles of academic freedom, cannot rest with the institution.

College or University Copyright Ownership

Situations do arise, however, in which the college or university may fairly claim ownership of, or an interest in, copyright in works created by faculty (or staff) members. Three general kinds of projects fall into this category: special works created in circumstances that may properly be regarded as “made for hire,” negotiated contractual transfers, and “joint works” as described in the Copyright Act.

1. *Works Made for Hire.* Although traditional academic work that is copyrightable—such as lecture notes, courseware, books, and articles—cannot normally be treated as works made for hire, some works created by college or university faculty and staff members do properly fall within that category, allowing the institution to claim copyright ownership. Works created as a specific requirement of employment or as an assigned institutional duty that may, for example, be included in a written job description or an employment agreement, may be fairly deemed works made for hire. Even absent such prior written specification, ownership will vest with the college or university in those cases in which it provides the specific authorization or supervision for the preparation of the work. Examples are reports developed by a dean or by the chair or members of a faculty committee, or college promotional brochures prepared by a director of admissions. Some institutions appear to treat course examinations as falling within this category, but the stronger case can be made for treating examinations as part of the faculty member’s customary instructional materials, with copyright thus owned by the individual.

The Copyright Act also defines as a “work made for hire” certain works that are commissioned from an individual who is not an employee but an “independent contractor.” The institution will own the copyright in such a commissioned work when the author is not a college or university employee, or when the author is such an employee but the work to be created falls outside the normal scope of that person’s employment duties (such as a professor of art history commissioned by the institution under special contract to write a catalog for a campus art gallery). In such situations, for the work-made-for-hire doctrine to apply there must be a written agreement so stating and signed by both parties; the work must also fall within a limited number of statutory categories, which include instructional texts, examinations, and contributions to a collective work.

2. *Contractual Transfers.* In situations in which the copyright ownership is held by the faculty (or staff) member, it is possible for the individual to transfer the entire copyright, or a more limited license, to the institution or to a third party. As already noted, under the Copyright Act, a transfer of all of the copyright or of an exclusive right must be reflected in a signed document in order to be valid. When, for example, a work is prepared pursuant to a program of “sponsored research” accompanied by a grant from a third party, a contract signed by the faculty member providing that copyright will be owned by the institution will be enforceable. Similarly, the college or university may reasonably request that the faculty member—when entering into an agreement granting the copyright or publishing rights to a third party—make efforts to reserve to the institution the right to use the work in its internally administered programs of teaching, research, and public service on a perpetual, royalty-free, nonexclusive basis.
3. *Joint Works.* Under certain circumstances, two or more persons may share copyright ownership of a work, notably when it is a “joint work.” The most familiar example of a joint work is a book or article written, fully collaboratively, by two academic colleagues. Each is said to be a “co-owner” of the copyright, with each having all the usual rights of the copyright owner (i.e., to license others to publish, to distribute to the public, to translate, and the like), provided that any income from such uses is shared with the other. In rare

situations, an example of which is discussed immediately below, it may be proper to treat a work as a product of the joint authorship of the faculty member and his or her institution, so that both have a shared interest in the copyright.

New Instructional Technologies

The development of new instructional technologies has led to some uncertainties with regard to the respective rights of the institution and its faculty members. For example, courseware prepared for programs of distance education will typically incorporate instructional content authored and presented by faculty members, but the college or university may contribute specialized services and facilities to the production of the courseware that go beyond what is traditionally provided to faculty members generally in the preparation of their course materials. On the one hand, the institution may simply supply “delivery mechanisms,” such as videotaping, editing, and marketing services; in such a situation, it is very unlikely that the institution will be regarded as having contributed the kind of “authorship” that is necessary for a “joint work” that automatically entitles it to a share in the copyright ownership. On the other hand, the institution may, through its administrators and staff, effectively determine or contribute to such detailed matters as substantive coverage, creative graphic elements, and the like; in such a situation, the institution has a stronger claim to co-ownership rights.

Ownership, Control, Use, and Compensation: Informed Allocation of Rights

Given the varying roles possibly played by the institution and the faculty member, and the nascent state of distance-education programs and technologies, it is not likely that a single principle of law can clearly allocate copyright-ownership interests in all cases. In some instances, the legal rules may warrant the conclusion that the college or university is a “joint author”; in other instances, that the institution should be compensated with royalties commensurate with its investment; and in yet others, that it has some sort of implied royalty-free “license to use” the copyrighted work. It is therefore useful for the respective rights of individual faculty members and the institution—concerning ownership, control, use, and compensation—to be negotiated in advance and reduced to a written agreement. Although the need for contractual arrangements has become more pressing with the advent of new instructional technologies, such arrangements should be considered even with respect to more traditional forms of authorship when the institution seeks to depart from the norm of faculty copyright ownership. An alternative format—perhaps somewhat less desirable, because less likely to be fully known to and appreciated by individual faculty members—would be detailed and explicit institutional regulations dealing with a variety of pertinent issues, subject to the strictures noted above concerning copyright transfers. Such regulations should, of course, give great weight to the views of the faculty, and may be reflected either in widely available institutional policy documents or in collective-bargaining agreements.

Whoever owns the copyright, the institution may reasonably require reimbursement for any unusual financial or technical support. That reimbursement might take the form of future royalties or a nonexclusive, royalty-free license to use the work for internal educational and administrative purposes. Conversely, when the institution holds all or part of the copyright, the faculty member should, at a minimum, retain the right to take credit for creative contributions, to reproduce the work for his or her instructional purposes, and to incorporate the work in future scholarly works authored by that faculty member. In the context of distance-education courseware, the faculty member should also be given rights in connection with its future uses, not only through compensation but also through the right of “first refusal” in making new versions, or at least the right to be consulted in good faith on reuse and revisions.